

Sermon on John 14:15-21

In the name of the Holy Trinity. Creator, Redeemer, and Advocate.

I have a memory from when I was maybe six. My clergy parents were heading off to a vestry meeting, and my brothers and I did not want them to go. The most vivid part of this memory is me clinging to my mom's leg, letting myself be dragged as she took a few steps. "We'll be back later," they said. "We'll see you tomorrow." It might as well have been forever. I liked our babysitter Linda pretty well, but in that moment everything in me just wanted my parents to stick around. "Linda will be here and then we'll come back." Great.

I wonder if the feelings in this memory are a milder version of how the disciples were feeling in this conversation with Jesus. Jesus has just washed the feet of his disciples, given them a new commandment to love, foretold Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial, and now is telling them to not let their hearts be troubled and that he is going away and where he goes, they cannot follow him.

Jesus, don't leave!

Just like my parents, Jesus could not promise to stay, but he could promise to come back and he also promised he would be *with* his disciples while away through an Advocate, a helper, a comforter, a counselor—the Holy Spirit.

This would be like if my mom revealed a twist. Don't be disappointed that you'll spend the evening with Linda because Linda *is* Me! Only kidding. This analogy falls apart pretty quickly.

So what does it mean to have to have this helper? What does the Spirit actually do? I can tell you what it looks like in my life. It might look completely different in yours. In my experience, the Holy Spirit—the communicator of truth—often communicates through intuition and instinct balanced with scripture and wisdom from people I trust.

It is this helper, this spirit, that has guided me through some of the most important decisions of my life—major changes that completely altered the trajectory I was heading in. From turning away from unhealthy behaviors, to choosing to leave a job I loved, to moving across the country for Divinity school—these choices felt less like premediated decisions and more like urgent prompts from a source outside myself.

Looking back at the passage...What's the business with this phrase "If you love me, you will keep my commandments?" Is Jesus offering an ultimatum? If you don't keep my commandments, it proves you don't love me. I don't think this is the most helpful take on this sentence. Instead of seeing this as transactional, I understand it as cause and effect. The result of loving Jesus is keeping his commandments. Not to mention, the greatest commandment is to love. So, if you are loving, you are keeping the great commandment.

The Gospel continues, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

Jesus does not only promise to be present with his followers—he promises an abiding within.

What does it look like for Jesus to be in the Father, us in Jesus and Jesus in us?

I believe this is intricately connected to loving Jesus and therefore keeping his commandments.

I think this is about aligning our will with God's will.

Well, how the heck can we know what God's will is?

Thankfully, God has provided some ways for us to hear what God might be calling us to do:

1. The whole of Jesus' life and teaching—his command to love God and each other as ourselves.
2. Other parts of scripture that share the truth of God.
3. And yes, a Divine Spirit that can inwardly guide us on the Way.

My understanding is that Jesus' commandments can also come through this counselor that the Lord sent to us. The day I quit my job to pursue my dreams, it felt like I was listening to an inward voice that was not my own. Kind of like the voice that speaks when silently reading. The day when I applied to Yale Divinity school, it felt just the same. You may have felt this too. My will was to try to stay at my job. My will was to not leave San Antonio where I had built a beautiful life. But I had to listen to these gentle commandments to leave what I loved. What I discovered was God knows what's best for us and we often have it mixed up.

Is relying this inward voice from the Spirit full proof? Definitely not. We are all human beings and we get it wrong sometimes. There are moments when we might think the Spirit is trying to tell us something, but after more reflection, consulting with trusted friends and mentors, praying about and seeking guidance through the Word of God, we might sometimes discover

the voice was our own—maybe a voice of fear. We have to be careful to not demand immediate answers from God for all of our various decisions. I've noticed the Spirit comes through with the important stuff, but it's rarely the timing I'm wanting or expecting. One of my favorite prayers in recent years has been, "God, if there is something I need to know, make it abundantly obvious."

It can also be easy to get caught up in big existential questions about what the heck our purpose is and what God wants for our whole entire life. Does God have a ten-year plan we have figure out like a puzzle? No, I don't think so. Jesus understands his followers might be obsessing about the future. How will we know what to do?

So, Jesus boils it down to the greatest commandment: love God and each other as ourselves. This is something that can be done one day at a time. It's a simple commandment—it doesn't require us to decipher any codes about our fate—and while it is simple, it is not easy. It might just be the hardest thing any of us could do. It was Christ's great love that led to his suffering, but also to his resurrection. It is a love that requires vulnerability and risk. A love that is costly, but which also brings freedom and new life. A love born from allowing ourselves to receive the infinite love of God. A love that is a response to the One who is Love.

As we walk in the Way, may we remember that Christ is with us and within us. Jesus has not left us orphaned. He is alive. He is here--right now. And he is not going away.
Amen.